

ARTICLE

Right-wing populism and government: An uneasy relationship

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Populism and government have been seen as incompatible entities. According to common wisdom, populist political parties suffer electorally when in government. Cooperation with the political establishment loathed by the populists compromises the credibility of the populist anti-establishment position. The pitting of the people against the unrepresentative and unresponsive political elites that has brought electoral fortunes is likely to be a burden when in government.

The idea that populist parties necessarily suffer from governmental responsibility rests on the assumption that the populist vote is an expression of protest. This idea is about punishing one or more of the established political parties, rather than an issue-based choice. Obviously, if the voters vote for right-wing populists out of disapproval of the mainstream political parties, and the right-wing populists collaborate with them, then this may appear as a sort of collusion with the enemy.

The populist vote: issue-based rather than protest-based

However, several studies suggest that the vote for a populist right-wing party rather is issue-based than protest-based. The sympathisers of populist right-wing parties are the most critical of immigration and European integration as well as the most distrusting of politics. It has been suggested however that the political distrust is a consequence of the feeling among the voters that the politicians are not taking their views into consideration. There is a lack of issue congruence as the political elites are perceived to be positive to immigration and the EU. From the assumption that the vote on populist right-wing parties is issue-based rather than protest-based follows that populist right-wing parties are punished if they fail to get their policies realised. If the populist party is unsuccessful to get its own policies through when supporting or participating in government it will –like any other party – fall short of voter expectations and will be electorally punished.



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Scouts lead a parade on the 17th of May, Norway's constitution day, holding Norwegian flags.

Right-wing political parties' experience in the Nordic region

The populist right-wing experience in the Nordic region – Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden – is illustrative. Three of the Nordic right-wing populist parties are conceived of as legitimate political parties with governmental credibility. In 2013, the Norwegian Progress Party for the first time ever became a member of a centre-right minority government. The Finns Party was welcomed in government following the parliamentary elections in 2015 after having backed from its demand of a Finnish exit from the Eurozone. These two populist right-wing parties have suffered electorally in the opinion polls after they had assumed governmental responsibility – albeit somewhat differently.

Finland: the Finns Party

The opinion support of the True Finns has more than halved compared to the parliamentary turnout of 17 percent. The reason is quite straightforward. The Finns has had to make compromises on three of its most salient electoral promises: no EU bailouts, no cuts in welfare and a stop to immigration. The eurocrisis aggravated in 2015 and the European Union took the decision to provide more economic support to Greece; the Finnish government voted in favour. The government has made substantial cuts in welfare in the ongoing Finnish economic downturn. And, never before have so many refugees arrived in Finland as during the autumn of 2015. In addition to the fall in opinion support, taking governmental responsibility has contributed to party-internal conflicts fought out in public. Groups of party members criticise the True Finns party leadership for prioritising power over ideological purity.

Norway: the Norwegian Progress Party

Whereas the Finns Party was not able to profit from the fact that for the party salient issues were high on the political agenda, the Norwegian Progress Party was more successful from this point of view. When entering government, the Progress Party's demands on more restrictive immigration policies and the use of the Norwegian Oil Fund resources for welfare were not accepted. Initially these compromises had a negative impact on the opinion support and disappointed party members left the party.

However, the Progress Party recuperated some of the support during the refugee crisis by the mobilisation of immigration and integration. The Norwegian government has restricted the number of asylum seekers, the economic support to immigrants was reduced and has been vocal on that immigrants have to adapt to Norwegian values – democracy, freedom and equality. The Progress Party Minister of Immigration Sylvi Listhaug demanded that immigrants integrate in the Norwegian society – We eat pig meat, drink alcoholic beverages and show our faces. Even though the opinion support for the Progress Party has been fluctuating when in government, the Norwegian case suggests that being able to get core issues high on the political agenda and, above all, influencing governmental policies moderate the loss of opinion support.



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Danish People's Party leader Thulesen Dahl explains during a debate how he would act in a Bourgeois government.

Denmark: the Danish People's Party

Influencing without assuming full responsibility for governmental policy-making appears to be the optimal position. The Danish People's Party was a support party for a centre-right government between 2001 and 2011, and has been successful in influencing and transforming Danish migration policies. Moreover, the party was successful in growing the popular vote as a support party.

Even though the Danish People's Party became the largest party of the centre-right parliamentary bloc, and the second largest party in the Danish parliament, it refrained from government participation following the 2015 parliamentary elections. The party leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl compared government to being a bird in cage, preferring policy influence over ministerial portfolios.

The Danish People's Party may be a pioneer initiating collaboration also to the left instead of only the right

However, a majority of the party members are in favour of government participation as they expect the party to have more of a say as a full member of the cabinet. Moreover, they prefer a government coalition with the social democrats. The party leaders of the Danish People's Party and the social democrats have declared they do not exclude future cooperation in government. Pia Kjærsgaard, co-founder of the Danish People's Party, stated her party was European avant-garde already in terms of setting up a highly structured and disciplined anti-immigration and anti-EU party with governmental credibility. As a matter of fact, Geert Wilders from PVV consulted her before acting as a support party for the Dutch centre-right government between 2010 and 2012.

Now, the Danish People's Party may be a pioneer initiating collaboration also to the left instead of to the right. This would enhance the strategic power of the Danish right-wing populist party possessing the parliamentary blackmailing position as it could ally with both the right and the left.

Sweden: the Sweden Democrats

The Sweden Democrats (SD) is still treated as a pariah party. Due to its historic origin in neo-Nazi subculture and radical immigration policies the other parliamentary parties have until now upheld a so-called 'cordon sanitaire' against the SD. This is in spite of the fact that several of the parliamentary parties have adapted to the SD policies and rhetoric on migration, and 'Swedish values' after the parliamentary elections of 2014, in particular after the government made the restrictive immigration turn during the autumn of 2015.

The 'cordon sanitaire' has not prevented the electoral growth of the SD. The party made its parliamentary breakthrough in 2010 with 5.7 per cent of the vote, which doubled to 12.9 in the 2014 parliamentary elections. In the present opinion polls the support is around 18-20 per cent. As the isolation has been accompanied by the mainstream parties adopting more liberal migration policies until 2015, the SD has been alone in presenting a clear anti-immigration position, and has as well obtained the policy ownership of the issue while being isolated.

In Sweden the electoral growth of the SD continues despite the cordon sanitaire

The opposition leader Anna Kinberg Batra (Moderate Party) has declared she is prepared to take support from the SD in order to make the present red-green minority government fall. However, the conservatives are polarised on the relationship with the SD. The parliamentary

elections of 2018 will be crucial for the future parliamentary position of the Sweden Democrats. And, in case the SD are let in from the cold, which parliamentary position would they prefer? The Nordic experience suggests as a support party to government.

Conclusion

To sum up, populist parties need not necessarily suffer in government. The belief that they must do so is based on the simplistic notion that a vote for a populist party is only a vote against the establishment; not a statement of preference for the policies the party represents. As the experience from Nordic populism shows, voters punish populist parties – not for participating in government – but for breaking electoral promises. In this sense, populist parties are much like all others.

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